Research Article

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Putting on Sarah's Skin: Victim Identity in the Abrahamic Stories and Beyond

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Abstract: This article explores the complex identities of Sarah and Hagar within the Abrahamic narratives, focusing on themes of victimhood and perpetration. It challenges feminist biblical interpretations that portray Sarah solely as a victim of patriarchal structures or postcolonial interpretations that see Sarah solely as a perpetrator, arguing instead for a nuanced understanding that recognizes her role as both a victim and an oppressor. The article highlights the unique as well as shared struggles of Sarah and Hagar against patriarchy, suggesting that their relationship is emblematic of broader issues of race, class, and gender dynamics. The analysis incorporates illustrations from the literature, urging a re-evaluation of Sarah's character in the light of contemporary discussions on oppression and complicity. By examining the narratives through the lens of cohabiting women, the article illustrates the complexities of their interactions and the implications for modern feminist discourse. Ultimately, it aims to liberate Sarah from her archetypal role, presenting her as a figure whose experiences resonate with the struggles of diverse individuals today, fostering a deeper understanding of victimhood, and promoting a non-violent response to systemic oppression.

Keywords: Sarah, Hagar, Abrahamic stories, victimhood, patriarchy, non-violent resistance

To don Sarah's skin is to embark on a journey through time, ideology, and the complex tapestry of women's relationships within patriarchal structures. Sarah and Hagar, though rooted in the biblical narrative of Gen 12–23, transcend their literary origins to become powerful archetypes for intersectional feminism. The skin metaphor unfolds on two intertwined levels: first, through the literal transformation of their depicted skin – from the racially non-thematised West Semite and Egyptian/Bedouin of ancient times,[1] to the stark contrasts of a white Victorian lady and a black slave,[2] and finally to the complex notion of the Jewish identity of the

1 Nasha Junior notes throughout her account that the modern understanding of "race" that we project onto the ancient context is anachronistic, and she emphasizes that it is more appropriate to refer to ethnicity instead because ethnicity "[…] refers to a dynamic and flexible group identity that involves shared genealogy, values, beliefs, behaviors, experiences, traits, and traditions." Junior, *Reimagining Hagar*, 4.

2 Cf. Taylor and Weir, *Let Her Speak for Herself.* However, Junior points out that the portrayal of "Black Hagar" is a relatively late construction, combining the biblical Hagar with the popular "Aunt Hagar" figure from blues music. This convergence first appeared in American novels, such as *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by Harriet Beecher Stowe, and gradually made its way into theology and biblical studies, most notably through Williams in her *Sisters in the Wilderness*. Junior emphasizes the distinction held in academia between "Black Africa" (Sub-Saharan Africa) and Egypt, whose civilization was highly esteemed, considered one of the cradles of civilization, and regarded more as part of the "Orient" than "Black Africa." While Hagar is referred to as "the Egyptian" or "from Africa," this did not automatically imply a "Black Hagar." Junior, *Reimagining Hagar*, 90–106.

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twentieth century.[3] This will be a minor point in my discussion, however, as others have already addressed it excellently.[4] In this article, I would rather like to invite you to slip metaphorically into Sarah's skin, to inhabit her situation and perspective. This act of empathetic imagination reveals that, stripped of historical and ideological context, Sarah emerges as a figure to whom women across cultures and times can relate. While intersectional explorations have often focused on Hagar as the oppressed slave, rightfully illuminating issues of race and class,[5] this article shifts the lens to Sarah without diminishing Hagar's crucial narrative. By centring Sarah, we uncover new layers of complexity in women's experiences, examining how privilege intersects with gender oppression and how women navigate power dynamics within patriarchal structures.

Sarah and Hagar became archetypes, respectively, for the law and the covenant, the church and the synagogue, for the free and the slave,[6] Christians and Jews, but also for Muslims and Jews/Christians, papists and reformers, and whites and "others."[7] They represent, therefore, a history of division and dichotomy. Both, however, were women, and both were mothers and their history has often been portrayed from the perspective of irreconcilable differences.[8] Letty Russell observes: "Hagar and Sarah are strangers caught in the dualistic and hierarchical social structures and thought patterns of the original storytellers and later interpreters, yet they themselves are examples of courage and faith struggle."[9] My focus on Sarah and the dynamics between her and Hagar aims to remind the reader that despite all the contextual differences, there are aspects of human character, relationships, and behaviour towards others that transcend their context – whether that be gender, race, or class – in this case, and here we refer to their identity as victims.[10]

To unpack Sarah's ambiguous character, I will present a narrative analysis of the key events within the Abrahamic stories of Genesis 12–23,[11] focusing on the complex interplay of masculinities and femininities embodied by Sarah, Hagar, and Abraham. Through the lens of feminist intersectionality, I will examine the shifting power dynamics and roles these three figures assume in their relationships, drawing parallels to contemporary power structures. I will then apply Julia Kristeva's psychoanalytical theory of victimhood to illuminate the ambiguous nature of Sarah's position. To bridge the ancient and modern, I will conclude with a literary exploration of similar ambiguities in Margaret Atwood's diptych *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments*, specifically analysing the characters of Aunt Lydia and the handmaid Janine.[12] These modern literary figures serve as compelling analogues to Sarah and Hagar, embodying the complex interplay of victimhood and complicity within oppressive patriarchal systems.

3 It should not be forgotten that Sarah was not a "white Victorian lady" but a Jew, which during a hundred (or more) years of anti-Semitism and anti-Judaism in Europe was not a favourable identity. In the 1930s, the name *Sarah* was used for all Jewish women who were eventually sent to their death. More elaborate on the topic cf. Levine, "Settling at Beer-lahai-roi" where the author warns against the toxicity of dialectical interpretations stigmatising the white/Jew.

4 Bjelland Kartzow, *The Slave Metaphor and Gendered Enslavement*; Junior, *Reimagining Hagar*, and others.

5 Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*; *Williams, Hagar in African American Biblical Interpretation*; Trible, *Texts of Terror*; Weems, *Just a Sister Away*; Felder, *Stony the Road We Trod*; Okoye, "Sarah and Hagar;" Bjelland Kartzow, *The Slave Metaphor and Gendered Enslavement;* and others.

6 Clark, "Interpretive Fate amid the Church Fathers," 133; cf. also Bjelland Kartzow, *The Slave Metaphor and Gendered Enslavement*, 63.

7 See for example Clark, *Hagar, Sarah and Their Children*; Okoye, "Sarah and Hagar;" Bjelland Kartzow, *The Slave Metaphor and Gendered Enslavement*, and others.

8 Russell, "Children of Struggle," 189.

9 Ibid., 192.

10 Sherwood, "And Sarah Died," 4–5. Jay, *Throughout Your Generations Forever*, xviii; Romanska, "Performing the Covenant," 29; Sherwood, "When 'Johannes de Silentio' Sounds Like 'Johanna de Silentio'," 5–6.

11 Unless otherwise stated, all biblical quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

12 Typically, the parallel is drawn between Sarah and "Serena Joy" (the Wife) and Hagar and Offred (the Handmaid), focusing on the surrogacy aspect. However, I am more interested in the power dynamics rooted in the victimhood of women and how these dynamics are played out by women in different life situations. From this perspective, it is more instructive to consider aunt Lydia as an example of a woman in power and Janine, the handmaid, who is further victimized through the birth of her disabled child.

1 Sarah the Victim – Sarah the Perpetrator: A Narrative Study of Masculinities and Femininities in the Abrahamic Stories

Initially rooted in white Euro-American academia, feminist biblical scholarship[13] and feminist theology looked to the Abrahamic stories as a natural focus. Sarah, a prominent female character in the narratives of the wandering patriarchs, became a compelling example. She is depicted as subordinate to Abraham, who is not only her husband, but also her master, manipulator, and oppressor,[14] and who was in all likelihood a wealthy owner of cattle and sheep. She enjoyed a comfortable life in her father-in-law's house in Haran[15] but left her home because of God's call to Abraham and made to wander across the country to an unknown land (Gen 12:1). Along the way, Sarah and Abraham faced a famine which brought them to Egypt (Gen 12:10). Fearful that the Egyptians would kill him because of Sarah's beauty, Abraham made her say she was his sister (vv. 11–13). Sarah was therefore prostituted to Pharaoh as part of his harem in exchange for possessions, including slaves, donkeys, and camels (v. 16). However, the Lord sent a plague on Pharaoh and his people for Sarah's sake, and Pharaoh gave her up (vv. 17–20). There is no mention of any punishment for Abraham, even though it was his idea to pretend that Sarah was his sister and to trade her for slaves and livestock. However, it would be an exaggeration to suggest that Abraham was a tyrant, an alpha male in a hierarchical patriarchal society, who dealt harshly with his wife. He committed this offence out of fear.

Nevertheless, Abraham did not learn his lesson and repeated the indiscretion by again presenting his wife Sarah as his sister in Genesis 20:2, this time to Abimelech, the king of Gerar. A similar scenario unfolds: God intervenes, and the baffled Abimelech sends Sarah back to Abraham with an understandable question: "What have you done to us? How have I sinned against you, that you have brought such great guilt on me and my kingdom? You have done things to me that ought not to be done" (Gen 20:9). This example appears even more demanding of some kind of punishment for Abraham. It can certainly be argued, however, that Sarah is complicit in both cases as she does not dispute her husband's decisions to pass her off as his sister. Moreover, we do not see any signs of pressure, violence, or threats which would possibly prevent Sarah from speaking out for herself. It is indeed a strange situation: Abraham's motivation is dubious, and Sarah's indifference is incomprehensible; Abraham appears to be a coward, while Sarah seems phlegmatic. Both Sarah and Abraham are passive and submissive – characteristics that are typically attributed to female characters. Yet just as we know that Abraham is not always a coward, and certainly not always passive or submissive – we see him bargaining with God regarding Sodom (Gen 18:23–32) and his son Ishmael (Gen 21:11–12) – we also know that Sarah does not always accept situations with the calm of a stoic. Sometimes she laughs (in Gen 18:10–15 regarding her prospective conception in her old age); but sometimes she deals harshly with others, particularly with Hagar, her slave girl.

The first mention of Hagar is in Gen 16:1. She might have been part of the "gift" from Pharaoh to Abraham for taking Sarah in Genesis chapter 12. Louis Ginzberg in his *Legends of the Bible* suggests that Hagar could have been a daughter of Pharaoh and that Pharaoh gave her to "princess" Sarah.[16] We know that Pharaoh "returned" Sarah to Abraham and that Abraham did not return the slaves, camels, and donkeys back to Pharaoh. But we know nothing for sure and this detail is not crucial. Hagar is Sarah's servant. In her despair at not having a child, at least this is what the biblical author–redactor wants us to believe, Sarah decides to offer Hagar to Abraham, hoping that Hagar will conceive and give birth to a child on her behalf. This was not a particularly strange or unthinkable idea in ancient Near Eastern society. The patriarchs usually had more than

13 By the term "feminist biblical scholarship," we refer to the systematic feminist approach to biblical texts that emerged in academic biblical studies during the 1970s, though recognizing that women's interpretative engagement with biblical texts has a much longer history.

14 Sherwood, "Passion – Binding – Passion," 211; Sherwood, "And Sarah Died," 267–9; Trible, "Genesis 22."

15 Gen 12:5 refers to the possessions, both people and cattle, which Abraham took with him, and which indicate that the family was well off.

16 Sarai in Hebrew can be rendered "princess" in English. See Ginzberg, *Legends of the Bible*, 108; see also Trible, "Ominous Beginnings," 36–8.

one wife, largely to secure more children for the tribe. Rachel, the wife of Jacob, also had a "surrogate mother," Bilhah, for her older sons (Gen 30:3). Like Sarah, Rachel imposed her slave girl on Jacob following the emotional exclamation: "Give me children, or I shall die!"[17] Beyond that, the ancient official laws, such as the Laws of Hammurabi, discuss surrogacy and adoption and the various rules to be observed.[18] A widely cited contribution by James Okoye points out that the Laws prohibited the casting out of the surrogate mother,[19] something Sarah clearly did. However, as there is no mention of real surrogacy or adoption in the text, it is difficult to decide whether Sarah's expulsion of Hagar was "only" cruel or "openly" unlawful. From Sarah's perspective, it seems illogical to say the least. Williams, however, points out the possible fear of the old and infertile Sarah that she might simply be exchanged for the younger and more fruitful Hagar.[20]

1.1 Sarah, the Silent Victim

Sarah's childlessness and eventual motherhood make her both victim and perpetrator in the Abrahamic stories, and both states are naturally linked to the role of a woman in the Hebrew Bible and the ancient Near East.[21] Some would say that the role of the mother has not changed so dramatically and that motherhood, and the gestation processes connected to it, make women more likely than men to suffer victimhood, even today.[22] As a foremother, Sarah struggled for many years to conceive and bear a child. We should not forget, however, that this story is not about Sarah. She plays a role in a narrative that showcases an omnipotent God who has a plan for God's people. Sarah serves to demonstrate this omnipotence: for the Lord God Almighty, anything is possible – the blind can see, the mute can speak, and the infertile can conceive. In the Hebrew Bible, there are no sterile men, only infertile women, who seemingly impede God's plans for both God's people and humanity as a whole. Sarah's ability to bear a child at her advanced age proves God's power. Later, however, this same God demands her son back in the well-known story of the Akedah in Genesis 22, when God asks that Isaac be sacrificed to God as a whole burnt offering. Importantly, God asks Abraham for Isaac's life but does not seek Sarah's consent. She has no authority to decide for Isaac. Sarah was blamed for not being able to bear a son, but once he is born, she is no longer responsible. The midrashim and various novels have speculated regarding Sarah's love for Isaac and her dispute with Abraham,[23] but in the biblical text of Genesis 22, no one asks Sarah what she thinks about the sacrifice. Instead, God asks Abraham. The reaction from Sarah's husband is puzzling, however. Rather than negotiate with God, as he does on the occasions we noted above, this time Abraham is silent.[24] Instead, he simply rises early in the morning, prepares for the journey, and sets out to kill his son, his heir, the fulfilment of God's promises (Gen 22:3). In this respect, Sarah appears to be an instrument in God's "test" of Abraham's trust and obedience. Sarah is a mute victim: she is both literally

17 This exclamation influenced Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale*. However, as I shall argue later, reference to Sarah and Hagar would be more fitting.

18 The Law of Hammurabi no. 146 says: "If a man take a wife and she give this man a maid-servant as wife and she bear him children, and then this maid assume equality with the wife: because she has borne him children her master shall not sell her for money, but he may keep her as a slave, reckoning her among the maid-servants." Yale Law School, "The Avalon Project." The Laws of Hammurabi (c. 1750 BCE) represent one of the earliest and most complete legal codes from ancient Mesopotamia. Inscribed on a basalt stele discovered in 1901, this collection of 282 laws covers various aspects of daily life, including family relationships, property rights, commercial contracts, and criminal justice. Cf. also. Ostriker, "The Face of the Other," 117.

19 Okoye, "Sarah and Hagar," 173.

20 Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 28. We will discuss this in more detail later.

21 Jay, *Throughout Your Generations Forever*; Sherwood, "And Sarah Died;" Sherwood, "Passion – Binding – Passion;" Sherwood, "Grammars of Sacrifice."

22 Kristeva, "Women's Time," 29; Kristeva, "About Chinese Women," 143; Anderson, "Sacrifice as Self-destructive 'Love'," 34.

23 Sherwood, "Grammars of Sacrifice," 38–65; cf. also Ramírez, *Sara*.

24 Some scholars, such as Ronald Krebs, James Middleton, and Simon Podmore, interpret Abraham's silence as a form of resistance. Krebs, "The Binding of Isaac and the Arts of Resistance;" Middleton, *Abraham's Silence*; Podmore, "The Sacrifice of Silence," See also my earlier work on silence as resistance: Koci, "All the Rest Is Commentary;" Koci, "Whose Story? Which Sacrifice?;" Coakley, "In Defense of Sacrifice."

and literarily non-existent, superfluous, undesired: she is entirely absent from the narrative in Genesis chapter 22,[25] perhaps because her emotions could have complicated the smooth operation of a divine scenario that Abraham chose not to complicate. But if in the biblical text, Sarah is merely a sideshow, here, in this article, she will be the main event.

1.2 Sarah, the Loud Perpetrator

A very different Sarah appears in chapters 16 and 21, where she becomes highly active in seeking to secure a child for herself, a course of action that exposes her to victimhood. First, in Genesis 16:2, she sends her husband to sleep with her servant Hagar: "You see that the LORD has prevented me from bearing children; go into my slave-girl; it may be that I shall obtain children by her." (This formulation is far from suggesting any formal arrangement of surrogacy and adoption in the sense of the Laws of Hammurabi.)[26] And Abraham obliged. He did not protest, or question Sarah's decision, or do anything to prevent the development of Sarah's plan. He acted, in fact, just like Sarah when Abraham passed her off as his sister. In verse 16:3, Sarah is very much the mover of things: "Sarai, Abram's wife, took Hagar the Egyptian, her slave-girl, and gave her to her husband Abram as a wife." One verse later, we read that very shortly after she conceived, even before she had given birth, Hagar "looked with contempt on her mistress." Hagar despised, mocked, and humiliated Sarah, who had orchestrated the entire situation. That's what the biblical author-redactor wants us to believe. However, we don't know exactly what Hagar did. Pamela Reis argues that the Hebrew phrasing 16:4d **ותקל גברתה בעיניה׃** suggests that Sarah became "light/insignificant" in Hagar's eyes and that the NRSV translation "she looked with contempt" along with variations in other English versions, is intensified by the subsequent verse 16:5.[27] This verse reads: "Then Sarai said to Abram, 'May the wrong done to me be on you! I gave my slave girl to your embrace, and when she saw that she had conceived, she looked on me with contempt. May the LORD judge between you and me!'" The term חמס employed in this verse – encompassing meanings of evil, outrage, and robbery, with both sexual and legal implications – has led scholars like Reis and Bellis[28] to propose that Abraham's sexual relations with Hagar continued beyond conception.[29] It is, therefore, not at all surprising that Sarah did not tolerate Hagar's behaviour and immediately wanted Hagar gone. Interestingly, she reproaches Abraham as if he had done something other than that which she had specifically commanded, Reis offers another explanation. She suggests that the feminine suffix of "you" in 16:5f, "May the LORD judge between you and me" **(ישפט יהוה ביני וביניך׃)** clearly indicates that not only had the sexual relationship between Hagar and Abraham continued, but that Sarah caught Abraham and Hagar engaged in sexual activity. While the first part of Sarah's statement was directed at Abraham, the final part was aimed at Hagar, who was personally present and Sarah was calling for the LORD to judge between her and Hagar, not between her and Abraham.[30] Sarah is Hagar's mistress, and she should have been able to deal with her directly, but it appears that although Hagar was in Sarah's authority before she conceived, once she was carrying a child, her destiny was in the hands of Abraham.[31] This situation seems to foreshadow Sarah's own situation when it comes to her

25 Sherwood, "And Sarah Died," 267; See also Sherwood, "Passion – Binding – Passion," 211.

26 The Laws of Hammurabi codified the practice of reproductive surrogacy in ancient Mesopotamia, allowing infertile wives to provide their husbands with slave women for procreation. According to these laws, while the children of such unions were considered legitimate, the surrogate mother remained a slave, illuminating the legal framework that might have influenced the biblical portrayal of Sarah and Hagar's relationship. The biblical account, however, lacks any clear characteristics of a legal framework. Yale Law School, "The Avalon Project."

27 Reis, "Hagar Requited," 83–7.

28 Bellis, *Helpmates, Harlots, and Heroes*, 61.

29 Reis, "Hagar Requited," 83–7.

30 Ibid.

31 See also Ullrich, *More than a Slave Woman*, 19; Trible, "Ominous Beginnings," 38–40. Cf. the already cited Law of Hammurabi no. 146.

son, Isaac. Sarah is responsible for the son she cannot conceive, but once he arrives, no one asks her opinion when he is about to be sacrificed. Here with Hagar, however, Sarah is quite adamant: she wants her justice, no one will look down on her ever again, and no one will laugh at her. To press her claim, she asks God to judge between her and Abraham, or (maybe more logically) between her and Hagar. As is typical in his dealings with Sarah, Abraham simply tells her to handle Hagar as she sees fit. Sarah "handled her" in such a way that Hagar chose to run away.

A similar situation occurs in Genesis 21 when on God's command Hagar returns. When Sarah conceives and gives birth to Isaac, she perceives a threat from Ishmael, her surrogate son: she is jealous on account of her own son and urges Abraham to send Hagar and Ishmael away again. English translations of Genesis 21:9 disagree on the use of the Hebrew participle מצחק. The NIV reads: "But Sarah saw that the son whom Hagar the Egyptian had borne to Abraham was mocking." The NRSV reads "was playing," we could say also was "playing with." The Hebrew text ותרא שׂרה את בן הגר המצרית אשׁר ילדה לאברהם מצחק is far from clear in this respect. The participle מצחק could mean both laughing or mocking, smiling with or at. Scholars also do not speak in one voice.[32] Okoye refrains from settling on a specific interpretation of the word and instead suggests using the Hebrew word: Ishmael was "Isaacing." This could mean anything from a harmless act, such as playing or smiling with Isaac, to something more harmful, like mocking or laughing at him. What Sarah saw was Ishmael "Isaacing" – playing Isaac, in other words, substituting him, and this is what provoked her anger and what she could not bear.[33] Erich Gruen suggests that the laughter with which Sarah reacted to the news of her conception, which gave her first and only child his name and served as a pretext for the expulsion of her rival Hagar and Hagar's son, was always a sign of Sarah's "dark character." Gruen observes: "Sarah once more is the darker figure in this tale. She was quick to take offense, even on trivial grounds, and insisted on drastic, unmerited, measures."[34] Was Sarah too quick and harsh? Was Ishmael just playing or smiling with his little brother? Or was she right? Was he "substituting" Isaac? Was Hagar substituting her in Gen 16:5? These questions are clearly interconnected but will remain hanging in the air. The expulsion of Hagar clearly restores Sarah's agency. However, feminist scholars who emphasise and elevate Sarah's role in the Hebrew national narratives, such as Ilana Pardes or Dvora Lederman Daniely, either mention Hagar's affliction without the reference to Sarah (as per Pardes)[35] or do not mention Hagar at all (as per Lederman Daniely).[36] The expulsion is, however, the key topic for biblical womanism[37] and postcolonial feminism,[38] where it is seen as a mark of patriarchy personified by the better-situated woman who is showing her dominance over the "lowly" slave girl, Hagar. While the feminist scholarship has increasingly focused on Sarah as either victim[39] or the heroine of the nation yet to be born,[40] it often overlooks the experiences of culturally and socio-economically marginalized women, such as the poor, the sick, or immigrants, who may identify more with the abused, mistreated, and ultimately expelled Hagar. The womanist and postcolonial debate has increasingly focused on the matter of race, to the same degree, perhaps, as the fundamentalist views from colonial times, where Sarah, despite her Semitic origin, was cast in the role of a cultured "white

32 For a comprehensive discussion on the topic of the participle, see Thabede, *Navigating the Threshold*, 56, 72.

33 Okoye, "Sarah and Hagar," 171.

34 Gruen, *Scriptural Tales Retold*, 27.

35 "[…] Hagar, the Egyptian handmaid, *whose affliction* foreshadows the nation's enslavement in Egypt […]" Pardes, *Biography of Ancient Israel*, 17. Italics mine.

36 Lederman Daniely, "'And Sarah Heard It in the Tent Door' (Gen 18,10)." Cf. also Susan Ackerman depicts instances in which women exercise their agency and show their assertiveness. Ackerman, *Warrior, Dancer, Seductress, Queen*; and *Gods, Goddesses, and the Women Who Serve Them*.

37 "[…] feminist intellectual framework that focuses on the conditions and concerns of women of color, especially Black women." Encyclopedia Britannica, "Womanism."

38 "[…] [postcolonial feminism] is located in the political, social and economic terrain of our contemporary postcolonial nation states. [and seeks to] explain the way in which power, ideology and identity intersect to maintain patterns and processes of inequality and discrimination which both structure and are reflected in black women's lives." Mirza, "Plotting a History," 2–3.

39 Sherwood, "And Sarah Died," 4–5. Jay, *Throughout Your Generations Forever*, xviii; Romanska, "Performing the Covenant," 29; Sherwood, "When 'Johannes de Silentio' Sounds Like 'Johanna de Silentio'," 5–6.

40 Pardes, *Biography of Ancient Israel;* Lederman Daniely, "'And Sarah Heard It in the Tent Door' (Gen 18,10)."

Victorian lady," in contrast to Hagar, the Egyptian, who was portrayed as a black representative of a barbaric, animistic society.[41] The application of racial analysis, while invaluable in colonial and post-colonial studies, requires careful contextualization when applied to different historical and cultural settings. The interpretative frameworks developed in post-colonial scholarship, though powerful, may need adaptation when examining texts and contexts outside the colonial experience.[42] Hagar's own "blackness" is assumed but never clearly stated and could be attributed to later constructions.[43] Interestingly, however, her name clearly translates as "fugitive" or "immigrant." In antiquity, Hagar's race did not inherently imply a lower status, throughout the centuries, her descent was considered rather oriental than African (meaning black African),[44] but colonial narratives distorted her identity, framing her as someone who needed to be "civilized" through the forceful imposition of the Bible.[45] Nevertheless, I suggest that the colonial bias and its postcolonial corrections should not be held as universally applicable and that the "colourful" dynamic between the two women should be open to other interpretations.

Bearing in mind the bias of the history of reception of this narrative, but also putting that bias slightly on hold, it is interesting to observe the dynamics between these two women. Sarah, the mistress of the household, needs something from Hagar, her subordinate handmaid, servant, slave. Sarah essentially prostitutes Hagar to her husband, hoping to obtain a child through her – a violent and oppressive act. What she did not expect was the reaction from Hagar. When Hagar conceives and thus fulfils one of the requirements for being taken seriously in a patriarchal society, she turns against her mistress. In response, Sarah retaliates, deciding it is not worth maintaining the relationship with Hagar, even at the cost of losing the child. And so, Hagar flees.

1.3 The Story of Sarah and Hagar as a Lens for the Phenomenon of Cohabiting Women

Sarah and Hagar are rivals. Sarah is higher on the social ladder, but Hagar is the one who is able to conceive. The dynamics between women who share significant life spaces – households, workplaces – is extremely interesting and remains a focus of socio-anthropological studies to this day. In her extensive research on the dynamics between cohabiting women in polygamous households in Uganda and elsewhere in Africa, Janet Seeley arrived at a straightforward conclusion: the relationships between these women evolve and change over time, depending on the context and the needs of the women and their children.[46] At times, they collaborate in common struggles, such as childcare or caring for one another in times of illness. At other times, they

41 Cf. Taylor and Weir, *Let Her Speak for Herself.*

42 I understand that in certain contexts, particularly those shaped by former colonial or colonizing histories, race and class play a crucial role, and I do not want to downplay the harm caused by the misuse of the Bible by colonizers. However, I believe it is important to liberate Sarah from her portrayal as a "white Victorian lady" (which she clearly was not) and to view her instead as a more privileged but infertile rival to her less privileged yet fertile handmaid, Hagar. The concepts of race and class were introduced much later and could not have played the same role in the ancient Near East. Most importantly, even though Hagar was interpreted as black in the literal (fundamentalist) interpretations of the pre-critical eras, there is no clear mention of Hagar being black in the Hebrew Bible. Coming from Egypt, she could have looked quite similar to Sarah, a West Semite. Additionally, there are still parts of the world where colonialism is not the defining context, and in these places, the dynamics between Sarah and Hagar are not viewed through such a strict dichotomy but are nonetheless worthy of exploring.

43 The blackness of Hagar is deeply rooted in tradition, above all in African biblical interpretation. Thabede, following other scholars such as Adamo and Eghwubare and their contribution "The African Wife of Abraham (Gn 16:1–16; 21:8–21)," argues that there are "good reasons" to assume that Hagar was regarded as a Black African woman, a descendant of Ham, the cursed son of Noah, who settled in Egypt. Thabede, *Navigating the Threshold*, 80; However, Junior argues that the perception of Hagar as being Black is a relatively recent development. Junior, *Reimagining Hagar*, 90–106.

44 Junior, *Reimagining Hagar*, 38–47.

45 Okoye, "Sarah and Hagar," 165–8; Reaves, "Sarah as Victim and Perpetrator," 487–9. See also Taylor and Weir, *Let Her Speak for Herself.*

46 Kawarazuka et al., "Women Bargaining with Patriarchy in Coastal Kenya."

may scheme against each other and compete for the favour of their husband. Seeley observes: "Conflicts had arisen over competition for a husband's affection and resources … Cooperation between co-wives sometimes developed into intimacy and trust. Ayisa [the third and youngest wife in a shared household with multiple women, one husband, and their children] experienced this in her marriage where she was cared for by her older co-wives like a daughter."[47] The dynamics between Sarah and Hagar can to some extent be viewed in a similar light. It is also no coincidence that the figures of Sarah and Hagar, and their cohabitation, hold a firm place in contemporary contextual approaches to the Hebrew Bible in Africa.[48] Instances of cooperation between Sarah and Hagar are not documented by the biblical author, but their rivalry is captured in chapters 16 and 21 and is discussed by various authors.[49] It is a rich debate, but an exceedingly challenging one. Reaves, for example, refuses to see the dynamics between Sarah and Hagar as rivalry because rivalry assumes some sort of equality, and claims rather that it is "a story of threat and survival."[50] In the light of Reaves's article, we might add "for Hagar," but in the light of the intellectual enterprise here, we might also add "and for Sarah." Current developments in postcolonial studies compel white women to confess their "sinful whiteness" and to see themselves "personally responsible" for our naïve recognition of Sarah as a victim of patriarchy rather than seeing her as the persecutor of Hagar, the black slave. I see this as an unnecessary dichotomy that projects an overly coloured dynamic viewed through a lens that sees only black and white.[51] Although the Bible does not recount instances of cooperation between Sarah and Hagar, studies from social anthropology seem closer to the everyday reality of co-habiting women than are purely synchronic literary analyses of the text.[52] Moreover, although Reaves shows some sympathy for Sarah when she is despised by Hagar, she considers this merely a pitiful event and draws back from blaming Hagar for her conduct.[53] Such an interpretation presents "sinful whiteness" as an ontological given and Frantz Fanon's "violence restores agency"[54] as a legitimate apology for anything Hagar did (or might have done) to her mistress. One could, on the contrary, argue that Hagar's aggression towards Sarah demonstrates that regardless of race, gender, or class, whoever has the upper hand will tend to misuse power against their subordinates. Such a dynamic undermines rather than empowers them. By exercising this aggressive will to power – typically associated with toxic masculinity – they unwittingly reinforce the patriarchal hierarchy. The figures of Sarah and Hagar and the stories in Genesis 16 and 21 offer a rich illustration of womanist approaches that strive for recognition and liberation from their white Euro-American "older sister." Hagar, the Egyptian slave, serves as a powerful example for womanists, the queer or LGBTQ+ who feel unrepresented by mainstream feminism. Sarah and Hagar thus highlight not only the relationship between white middle-class women and marginalized women but also between white middle-class feminism and marginalized feminism (i.e. womanism, queer, LGBTQ+). And in both these roles – whether representing individual women or whole disciplines – the two women illustrate the malign power of patriarchy which is maintained by their struggle against one another. Interestingly, they also demonstrate that this patriarchal power cannot be assigned to any particular identity.

47 Seeley, "The Changing Relationships of Co-wives," 74–5.

48 Thabede, *Navigating the Threshold*, 46–115.

49 Zucker and Reiss, "Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar as a Blended Family," 1–18. See also Trible, "Ominous Beginnings," 1–32; Okoye, "Sarah and Hagar;" Reaves, "Sarah as Victim and Perpetrator."

50 Reaves, "Sarah as Victim and Perpetrator," 486.

51 Cf. As both Bellis (*Helpmates, Harlots, and Heroes*, 60–6) and Levine ("Settling at Beer-lahai-roi") demonstrate, imposing modern racial categories on Sarah and Hagar misrepresents the historical context. Their work cautions against dialectical interpretations that not only mischaracterize the biblical narrative but also risk perpetuating harmful stereotypes, including twentieth-century antisemitic prejudices.

52 Kawarazuka et al., "Women Bargaining with Patriarchy in Coastal Kenya;" Seeley, "The Changing Relationships of Co-wives." See also Sergio Ramírez's artistic adaptation *Sara*, which depicts an intimate domestic scene between Sarah and Abraham including Hagar as they discuss preparations for their visitors: "Tell Hagar, once she has finished washing the feet, to bring you three bowls of fresh water for drinking. Then take three measures of the finest flour, make it into dough, and bake cakes in the embers. Do this yourself and do not entrust it to anyone else, lest they burn the cakes." (translation mine) Ramírez, *Sara*, 26.

53 "It is because of this awareness [of the white privilege] that I am reluctant to read Hagar as having wronged Sarah." Reaves, "Sarah as Victim and Perpetrator," 491.

54 Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 1–52.

The dynamics outlined above are explored in the feminist discourse on intersectionality, which examines the layers of oppression that affect different social groups, and which developed in the context of African-American women.[55] Two of the prominent social categories analysed through an intersectional lens are race and gender. In the case of Sarah and Hagar, intersectionality can be linked to the contributing factors of race and slavery, whereby the former is indeed a later construction. The frequent invocation of the relationship between these two women by various sub-fields of feminist criticism suggests that racism and slavery are part of a broader phenomenon rooted in the victim identity of those striving to escape oppression.

Therefore, when we consider "putting on Sarah's skin," we must recognize the layered complexities of Sarah's story. She is not merely a passive figure in a patriarchal narrative. She is also an active participant in the oppression of others. Understanding her dual role helps us better comprehend the intricate dynamics of power, victimhood, and agency within feminist biblical criticism and beyond. We are putting ourselves in the shoes of a woman who although a literary character has influenced the fates of real women across history until today, who has been manipulated and misused by divine and earthly powers alike, and who embodies both the pain of exploitation and the hope of a promise fulfilled. Sarah helps us to explore the themes of faith, sacrifice, and the enduring struggle for identity and dignity in the face of overwhelming odds.

1.4 The Ambiguous Victimhood of Sarah

Sarah symbolizes the complex nature of female victimhood, which manifests in two distinct ways. On the one hand, she submits to Abraham; on the other, her reaction towards Hagar is active aggressive. This duality reflects a broader pattern observed in people who suffer from long-term oppression – whether men, women, or others (though my focus is on women). Such people tend to react submissively towards their perceived superiors and oppressively towards those they see as their subordinates. The psychoanalyst and linguist Julia Kristeva shares René Girard's well-known view that humanity is trapped in a cycle of violence, often creating a sacrificial scapegoat[56] recruited predominantly from among women because of their radical otherness.[57]

Drawing on psychoanalysis and the philosophy of language, Kristeva offers a nuanced interpretation of feminine otherness which sets women out as primary victims.[58] She argues that women's gestation processes expose them to a hostile world, a world, Kristeva argues, that is structured in such a way as to accommodate the male rather than the female *being in the world*, a state of affairs that can be seen in both the struggles associated with childbirth (psychoanalytical ground) and the prevailing rigid symbolic (linguistic) structure.[59] Women, according to Kristeva, desire a fictitious woman who unlike them suffers no castration (which usually results from gestation processes and subsequent abjection by the child) and who does not require a man in order to conceive.[60] Based on this observation, Kristeva suggests that society's deep sense of indebtedness to the woman-mother – especially among marginalized groups like women – often leads to extreme reactions: "[This] eternal debt to the woman-mother … makes a woman more vulnerable within the symbolic order, more fragile when she suffers within it, and more aggressive when she defends herself from it."[61] Thus, women in positions of power adopt a harsher approach, while those facing oppression tend to sacrifice themselves. This important observation deconstructs gender stereotypes by attributing oppression and the

55 Crenshaw et al., *Blackness at the Intersection*; or cf. Cho et al., "Toward a Field of Intersectional Studies."

56 Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, 12. See also Girard, *The Scapegoat*, 43.

57 See Girard, *The Scapegoat*, 49.

58 For a comprehensive analysis of Kristeva's theory of women victims, see my earlier work Koci, "Sacrifice and the Self;" and "'All the Rest is Commentary'."

59 Kristeva, "Revolution in Poetic Language," 93.

60 Kristeva, "Women's Time," 29. In the poetic and autobiographical "Stabat Mater," Kristeva, herself raised in the Orthodox Church, argues that the Virgin Mary – the virgin mother – can represent this archetype of the archaic mother. Kristeva, "Stabat Mater," 148.

61 Kristeva, "Women's Time," 29.

patriarchal misuse of power to anyone in power, whether they be men or women. Kristeva does not want women to give up their feminine identity and distinctiveness and insists that women are victims of what she calls the "founding sacrifice." To heal the damage of the founding sacrifice, we must challenge the myth of the archaic mother, in other words, challenge patriarchy.[62]

Borrowing the foremother Sarah and her twofold victim identity, we may say that we are "in Sarah's skin" when we feel we are victims of the patriarchal power structures that make us aggressive and violent in our attempts to defend ourselves and maintain our position in society. Such a phenomenon appears among groups that are typically considered "oppressed" and are expected to express solidarity with one another, for example women. This was, after all, the purpose of the first feminist movements – to unite in the struggle for liberation from oppressive patriarchy. It appears, however, that violence among subalterns is more prevalent than is the collective effort to create unity in the struggle towards a common goal, such as liberation. According to Fanon's claim, noted above, that "violence restores agency," power games compel us to commit violence against those who are, or who at least appear to be, our subordinates. However, as Girard argues, violence begets violence and tends to return in cycles.[63] This simple truth was experienced first hand (or "in his own skin") by Fanon during the Algerian Civil War when the native Algerians he initially supported turned against him. It was a grim reminder of the well-known adage from the French Revolution: "Like Saturn, the Revolution devours its own children." Thus, rather than giving someone a taste of their own medicine in order to restore one's agency, a better way out of the cycle of violence may be to fight patriarchal power structures.

1.5 Sarah and Hagar, Aunt Lydia and Janine: Patriarchy in the Hands of Women

I will devote the remainder of the article to some illustrations from the novels of the feminist author Margaret Atwood. Drawing on Atwood's work as a literary example seems particularly appropriate given her Episcopalian background and the rich tapestry of biblical allusions, both explicit and implicit, that characterize her novels. Atwood touches upon the theme of sacrifice and victimhood[64] (especially the victimhood of women[65] and different levels of oppression among women) in many of her novels.[66] However, her diptych *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) and *The Testaments* (2019) could be said to offer the clearest illustration of both the abuse of power by women on the one hand and their total submission on the other, both of which come as a reaction to long-term oppression. The setting for Atwood's dystopian novels is the theocratic state of Gilead on the territory of the former USA, which has been destroyed in a civil war. Gilead is run according to a rigid patriarchal system where women are subordinate to men. The state has a very firm structure and hierarchy with assigned roles and clear competencies that may not be overstepped. The names for these roles are taken from the Bible and refer to specific missions fulfilled by their biblical representatives. Space does not allow a detailed description of the state of Gilead, but two of those roles are important for this illustration. Starting at the bottom of the hierarchy, a *handmaid* (a word also used in the Abrahamic stories to describe Hagar) was a woman assigned to an infertile married couple to serve as a surrogate mother.[67] A handmaid was typically

62 Kristeva, "Women's Time," 29; Weir, *Sacrificial Logics*, 148–53.

63 Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, 12.

64 Atwood formulates her own understanding of victimhood, the so-called "basic victim positions" based on theories of Hannah Arendt. Atwood, *Survival*, 36–9.

65 Atwood's understanding of women victimhood (position two) is the following: "To acknowledge the fact that you are a victim, but to explain this as an act of Fate, the Will of God, the dictates of Biology, the necessity decreed by History, or Economics, or the Unconscious, or any other large general powerful idea." Atwood, *Survival*, 37.

66 Atwood, *The Edible Woman*; Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*; Atwood, *Alias Grace*; Atwood, *The Testaments.* This is just a selection of Atwood's novels that deal with the theme of women's victimhood.

67 It should be noted that regarding surrogate motherhood, Atwood refers to another biblical story, that of Rachel and Leah in Gen 29. At the *Rachel and Leah Center* (the Red Center), handmaids are trained to serve as surrogate mothers and are deprived of all rights, not only to their prospective children but also to themselves. They *are* truly slaves – subjects of their mistresses (the *wives*) just like the biblical handmaids are subjects of their infertile mistresses (the Hebrew Bible knows only infertile women, not sterile

recruited from among women who did not conform to Gilead's "high" moral standards but had proven their ability to bear children. She might have been a single mother, a divorced woman or the wife (partner) of a divorced man, or a woman who had had an abortion. Secondly, at the top of the women's hierarchy, the role of *aunt* was filled by those of the same "moral" profile as handmaids but with two important exceptions: such women had (i) led a successful career in a high managerial/juridical position, and (ii) killed one of their peers during the process of "filtration."[68] There has been much discussion, both lay and scholarly, about the role of the "Atwood handmaid,"[69] often alongside discussion of the controversial abortion laws in Europe and the USA. I will leave this field to others and focus my attention on the dialectic between a handmaid and an aunt as an illustration of Sarah's "victimhood" and Kristeva's theory of victim identity, according to which, as we have already noted, those who suffer long-time oppression tend either to self-sacrifice or to sacrifice others.

While set in a dystopian future America, Atwood's narrative echoes the patriarchal systems evident in the Abrahamic stories of Genesis 12-23, suggesting enduring patterns in how societies structure gender relations and reproductive rights. Because of this similarity of context (and despite the obvious differences in time and space), Atwood's novels offer us a unique opportunity to compare observations of the double victimhood of Sarah in the Abrahamic stories with their conceptualization in the psychoanalytical and linguistic philosophy of Julia Kristeva. I refer here to Kristeva's theory, just noted, that long-term oppression and victimization lead either to self-sacrifice or to sacrificing others. Kristeva writes about the oppressive, patriarchal (although ostensibly equal or even feminist), class-based (although ostensibly classless) context of the Soviet Union, a society where non-stop surveillance by the state (the secret police, the KGB), or even by one's neighbours, friends, or family members, was the norm. Women who managed to break through the myriad constraints, Kristeva suggests, tended to become aggressive ("viral") and oppressive towards others.[70] Although these women were in high positions in the public sphere (politics, academia), the reason for their behaviour was the same as for those who totally submitted to the system and participated in their own oppression, in short, gendered oppression. In one of her interviews, Atwood confesses that the context of Gilead, with its omni-present fear and surveillance of everyone by everyone, was influenced by her travels to socialist Eastern Europe which she made during her stay in Berlin.[71] From Atwood's novels *The Testaments* and *The Handmaid's Tale*, I put forward the figures of Lydia, an *aunt*, and Janine, a *handmaid*, and give an example of the fates of these two women alongside the biblical Sarah and Hagar. Here, I apply the criteria of intersectionality, that is, of multiple identities and various layers of oppression; however, for reasons mentioned above, I do not see the major divide in terms of race and class because they correspond neither to the biblical context nor to Atwood's dystopian contexts. The humiliation of handmaids is rooted in various factors, not in race or class, and is

men). I use the references to Sarah and Hagar, however, because the story in Gen 16 and 21 is more instructive regarding the victimization process. Hagar has her own voice, and her interaction with Sarah is more telling when it comes to the dynamics between the two female characters.

68 This is an important aspect in the process of the aunts' victimization, as it makes them complicit in murder. Aunt Lydia recounts: "On the fourth day there was a variation: three of the shooters were women. They weren't in business suits, but in long brown garments like bathrobes… It was like my nightmare, except that the women were blindfolded and when I shot, I did not fall." Atwood, *The Testaments*, 144, 172.

69 Graybill and Sabo, "Who Knows What We'd Make of It." *See also* Reaves, "Sarah as Victim and Perpetrator." Reaves suggests that the relationship between the handmaid and the wife echoes that between Hagar and Sarah. My own aim in this article, to portray the twofold victimhood of Sarah, is different, and I therefore choose to illustrate my argument with the help of the handmaid and the aunt.

70 Kristeva, "Women's Time," 29.

71 Atwood's Gilead was, in fact, inspired by the totalitarian regimes of socialist Eastern Europe, where she travelled during her time in Berlin when she was composing *The Handmaid's Tale*. Atwood recounts: "[…] from Berlin we were able to visit East Germany, Poland and Czechoslovakia which were all at that time still part of the Soviet Socialist Republic penumbra; they were satellite states at that time. And that was very atmospherically inspiring, by which I mean that people were very reluctant to talk to you, unless they had a safe place to do it in and unless they were pretty certain that you weren't going to blow their cover. So I did a certain amount of that. It was pretty instructive, how afraid people were of saying anything that was going to get them in trouble and how careful people from the West had to be not to say, 'and so-and-so told me this and so-and-so told me that.'" Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale Is Being Read Very Differently Now*; cf. also Atwood, "Introduction," xiii.

primarily inflicted by other women – especially aunts, but also by wives, who despise the handmaids precisely because they rely on them to produce children.[72] The so-called "marthas," older women with clear moral profiles but unable to bear children, serve as housekeepers and contribute to the handmaids' marginalization.[73] Even handmaids themselves partake in this cycle of humiliation once they succeed in their "mission" to conceive.[74] Atwood concludes: "Yes, they [women] will gladly take positions of power over other women... in systems in which women as a whole have scant power."[75] This may be understood as an echo of Kristeva's theory presented above. Pilar Somacarrera skilfully captures the nature of the aunts, who are both "tyrannical and maternal" figures. Through their surveillance over all women – including wives and "marthas" – they help to sustain the patriarchal structure.[76] Aunt Lydia's transformation into a "monster" and her abuse of power are detailed in her "testament," titled *The Ardua Hall Holograph*, intricately woven into *The Testaments.* She was tortured herself by the leaders of Gilead, the commanders – both mentally and physically – and, like all the other aunts, she also committed murder.[77] She was simultaneously as both victim and perpetrator. While some of the women refused the murderous initiation that would have made them aunts, they ultimately became victims themselves.[78] Though they paid with their lives, they maintained their moral integrity by refusing to participate in the creation and perpetuation of this dehumanizing system. The handmaid Janine who was repeatedly tortured psychically and physically by the aunts and despised by the handmaids is the example from the other side of the spectrum, lacking any kind of power.[79] And then again, when she conceived (in echo of the biblical Hagar) looked down on other handmaids.[80] Unlike the biblical Hagar, however, who is ultimately blessed by God (Gen 16:11) and is the first person ever to name God (Gen 16:13), Janine got ultimately devastated when her child turned out to be unable to survive.[81]

Lydia and Janine lived in what had been a modern liberal democratic society, one we would recognize in the United States of the latter part of the twentieth century – just, equal, open, or at least almost so – but which after a coup and a civil war had become conservative, patriarchal, class-bound, hostile towards women, and oppressive towards any form of otherness. I suggest that the contexts and paths through which one of these women became an *aunt* and the other a *handmaid* are similar. These contexts are framed by (i) two identities they held in common: they were both women who lived in a patriarchal society and were both victimized (they both lived without the protection of an institutionalized marriage and had both had abortions); and (ii) two different identities: *aunts* enjoyed an elevated position in society but were also, because of their advanced age, infertile; *handmaids* were working class but fertile (had proved their ability to bear children – either by giving birth outside marriage or by having had an abortion). These identities of *aunt* and *handmaid* recall those of Sarah and Hagar but also portray the image of the two Sarahs: Sarah the oppressed and Sarah the oppressor, and the relationship between the two. Postcolonial scholarship, building largely upon studies of intersectionality, emphasizes the role of race, specifically that Hagar, the slave, is "black," and Sarah, the mistress, is "white." This interpretation is understandable within postcolonial efforts to put right historical iniquities, but it should not be considered the only hermeneutical key to these particular intersectionalities.

72 Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, 14–6. Not all the wives needed handmaids, some could have their own children.

73 "[...] it's the red dress [a handmaid uniform] she [Rita, the "martha"] disapproves of, and what it stands for. She thinks I may be catching, like a disease or any form of bad luck." Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, 10.

74 Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, 26–7.

75 Atwood, "Introduction," xii.

76 Somacarrera, "Margaret Atwood on Questions of Power," 40.

77 Atwood, *The Testaments*, 169–72.

78 Ibid., 144, 169–72.

79 Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, 116–33; cf. also Atwood, "Introduction," xv–xvi.

80 "'Showoff,' a voice hisses, and this is true. A woman that pregnant doesn't have to go out, doesn't have to go shopping... The voice behind me was right. She's come to display herself. She is glowing, rosy, she's enjoying every minute of this." Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*. 26.

81 Atwood, The *Handmaid's Tale*, 214–5.

2 Concluding Remarks

The optimistic ending to *The Testaments* attests that the creed of "violence restores agency" fails to offer a constructive or sustainable future. The rotten and corrupt theocratic-patriarchal system of Gilead disintegrated from within. In addition to the guerrilla movement "Mayday" and its freedom fighters, it was primarily figures from the leadership of the state, such as aunt Lydia, who slowly but firmly abandoned their tyrannical practices against their subjects, ultimately contributing to the collapse of the totalitarian system. This is not to undermine the courage and endurance of the freedom fighters, nor to defend Aunt Lydia. It is simply an observation that the system collapsed because of the deliberate and nonviolent decision by those in power to stop supporting tyranny and in so doing put an end to the suffering of many.

That Sarah was a victim of her husband, of the patriarchal God, of the biblical authors and redactors, and of her infertility and later her motherhood, demonstrates the different shades of victimhood and the tendency of everyone, including victims, to misuse power when it is in their hands. After everything she endured, including humiliation by Hagar, Sarah could have chosen nonviolence over violence and simply "observed the two boys playing together" (Gen 21:9 NRSV, my wording). Even if Ishmael occasionally "mocked" (NIV) Isaac, Sarah could have let it go and not overinterpreted the children's games. However, her insecurity, which stemmed from her victimhood, did not allow her to let this incident pass unnoticed. She decided to act, and she acted violently. Bellis observes: "Sarah's story is replayed wherever and whenever the oppressed oppress those who have even less power."[82] Sarah is not a hero. Similarly, Hagar, after she conceived, misused her upper hand over Sarah and acted violently against her mistress. This universal tendency demands active resistance through the conscious exercise of individual will. The attempt to reclaim one's agency at another's expense merely perpetuates cycles of violence, offering no sustainable resolution. While Fanon advocates for violent resistance, genuine transformation necessitates embracing nonviolent alternatives. The path forward lies in a personal commitment to nonviolence, even when such a choice may exact a profound cost.

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82 Bellis, *Helpmates, Harlots, and Heroes*, 62.

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